

International Mother Language Day
21 February 2023, 3 p.m.

**Transcript of the remarks by Movses Abelian,
Under-Secretary-General
for General Assembly and Conference Management
and UN Coordinator for Multilingualism**

“Multilingual Education - a Necessity to Transform Education”

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

From the outset, allow me to thank and congratulate the Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations, H.E. Amb. Muhammad Abdul Muhith, for his kind invitation to me, in my capacity as Coordinator for Multilingualism at the United Nations, to be here, but I would like to also thank him for making this event in person. As you know, for the last three years, we were not able to host events in person, so I’m very grateful that you are re-establishing back the tradition.

The theme that brings us together today – “Multilingual Education - a Necessity to Transform Education” – is central in many respects, for Member States, as well as for the United Nations. Central, because in an increasingly interconnected world, the need for multilingual skills is becoming more than just an asset, but a necessity.

Our Organization also depends on these multilingual language skills, both for the proper functioning of its deliberative bodies, its effectiveness in the field, and its transparency vis-à-vis the public. The Organization can foster them, deepen them, or even cultivate them from the ground up, thanks to its language training programmes at UN headquarters and at various duty stations. However, the Organization also and above all, depends on the work carried out by the Member States, through their educational and university policies, so that the human resources entering the United Nations are not only multilingual, but also are sensitive to the cultural diversity which is the heart of our mandates.

It is also in the name of diversity that, within our Organization, multilingual training must be a reality. It is in this spirit, for example, that mandatory training provided by the United Nations Secretariat is offered in several languages, as evidenced, for example, by the recently added “United for Respect” training, which is available in the six official languages of the Organization. As UN Coordinator for Multilingualism, I also encourage all entities in the Secretariat to produce an inventory of the language skills of all their staff. This would among other things, allow for ensuring that the languages used by trainers meet the language needs of their recipients, because, at the end of the day, as UNESCO rightly points out, one cannot learn, retain or digest knowledge that we do not fully understand.

In my capacity as Under-Secretary-General for the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, overseeing all language services at the four duty stations, I want to stress how dependent our Organization is on the work conducted by the educational institutions in your respective countries, to supply the UN with qualified language staff. At the UN, we are doing our part, as part of our Outreach-to-University programme, to support the training of future generations of language professionals and allow them to reach the level of excellence required to pass our competitive examinations. But the greater part falls under the care of the Member States. A need for excellent knowledge of the mother tongue, into which interpretation and translation is done at the UN, is sometimes underestimated by the academia which focuses on teaching foreign languages.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Needless to say, this is far from being the only reason why mother tongues are important to us. Our individual mother tongues link each of us to our cultural heritage. Yet, around the world, an alarming number of languages are forever lost every year, at an accelerating rate. Regrettably, we are seeing a similar loss of language diversity within the UN Organization itself, which is not immune to this scourge.

Our latest Secretariat-wide Survey on Multilingualism, in which nearly 4,000 staff members took part, showed that, collectively, respondents represented more than 200 distinct mother languages, but only 106 “main” languages, defined as the language one knows best. There are most probably multiple causes to such a discrepancy, and they may even come from a time preceding their entry into the Organization. But it is nevertheless an observation which is a source of concern, and which deserves our attention.

Before I conclude, I would like to take the opportunity of today’s celebration to welcome the work done by our colleagues from the Department of Global Communications, who today, on International Mother Language Day, released a publication entirely dedicated to multilingualism at the UN, to which I was also happy to contribute. This publication, part of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library’s “Why it Matters” series, shows how multilingualism, which is inherent in the work of the UN, has gradually evolved over the past decades to now be considered a core value of the Organization. I would also like to congratulate the team in my department who worked on the translation and graphic design of this publication to enable its simultaneous issuance in the six official languages of the UN. And I would like also thank our own interpreters for sitting here today, making us to understand each other better. They are the best of the best in the world.

And with that, I would like to thank Ambassador Muhith once again for his invitation, and I am very happy to congratulate everyone on International Mother Language Day, and I would like to say something in my own mother language, which I will say in Armenian: “Շնորհավոր մայրենի լեզվի միջազգային օրը”.

Thank you.